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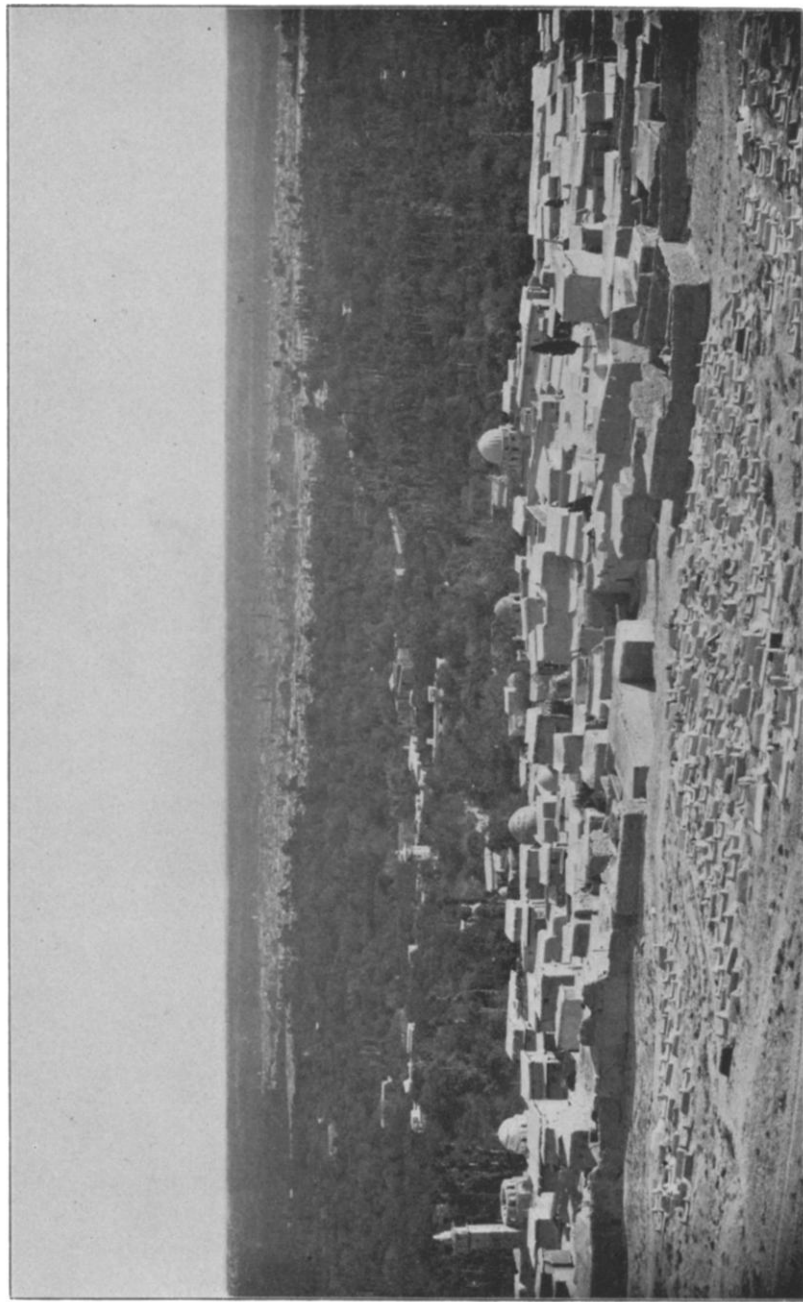
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DAMASCUS, THE OLDEST CITY IN THE WORLD.

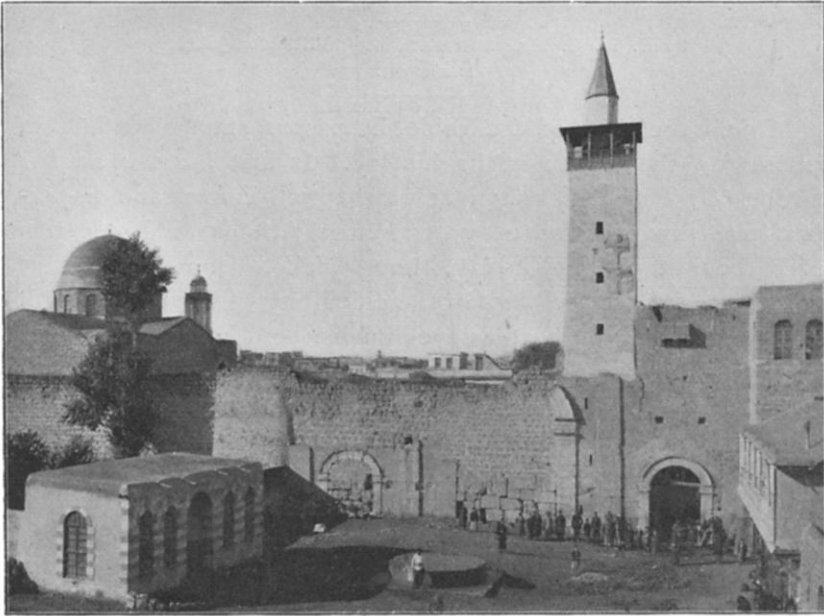
By E. W. G. MASTERMAN, M.D., F.R.C.S., F.R.G.S.,
Damascus.

OF all the cities of the Bible, Damascus stands far first in respect to the length of its history. It first burst upon our notice (Gen. 14 : 15) as, apparently, a well-known and important place many hundred years before Athens or Rome was ever thought of; and today, though fallen from her former greatness, she remains by far the chief city of Syria, and with every likelihood of greater development before her, many ages after great Babylon and Nineveh have passed away. The ever-green prosperity of Damascus, which has survived numerous conquests and arisen, often rejuvenated, after each, does not depend upon chance circumstances, but upon a combination of advantageous natural gifts and an almost unique commercial position. The first lie in her situation upon a vast alluvial plain, perennially supplied with water and enormously fruitful; the second is her being, as it were, a great port on the desert sea which stretches away to Asia Minor, Mesopotamia, and Arabia. Although all the wealth of the Indies and China does not, as of yore, pass through her on its way to the West, yet she is still a great emporium for eastern goods and the mart of European goods for all the inhabitants of the desert. She is the seat of government of a *Wali*—one of the highest Turkish officials; she is one of the holiest and greatest Moslem cities, and has for many centuries been the residence of one of the three Nestorian patriarchs, that of Antioch. Now, as in the conquering days of Syria's greatness, armies go forth from Damascus, where there is maintained a regular garrison of 7,000 men, including all branches of the service, and the successors of great Naaman, "captain of the host of Syria," today parade her streets in their nineteenth-century "chariots."



DAMASCUS—GENERAL VIEW OF THE CITY

Modern Damascus is a somewhat compact city of about 200,000 inhabitants. As viewed from the mountains¹ to the west, it is seen to be somewhat of the shape of a tennis racket. The blade is the city proper, largely confined within its ancient,



DAMASCUS—THE GATE OF "STRAIGHT STREET," SHOWING ANCIENT ROMAN GATEWAY

crumbling walls, and the long handle is the *Meidan*, *i. e.*, race course, a long, straggling street consisting of granaries, small shops, and mosques which have sprung up along the first mile of that *via dolorosa* of modern times, the *Derb el Haj*, along which pass yearly the long caravans of pilgrims to Mecca. The city proper is bisected from east to west by the great *Tareek es Sultan*, almost undoubtedly the "Straight street" of Acts 9:11; it certainly today is the only street within the ancient limits which could possibly with justice receive that name. We know from history and from the present remains that it was a magnificent street, a mile long, divided into three parts by continuous rows

¹ See frontispiece.

of splendid columns. Where this thoroughfare used to terminate at its western end in a fine triple gateway, the present road divides; the southern branch goes south, forming the great *Meidan*, and thence to Mecca, and the northern, after passing the barracks, the citadel, and the great square of the *Serai*, or government offices, is continued as the great French road seventy miles to Beirut.

The plain of Damascus, known as the *Ghûtah*, is an oasis on the edge of the great desert which slopes thence to the Euphrates. It is an average height of 2,200 feet above the sea. As viewed from the mountains to the west, in the spring it is one great mass of green, with the city, like a pearl set in emeralds, in the midst. These extensive woods, gardens, and pastures are of course not all cultivated directly from the great city, but dotted about in every part are numerous villages, about 120 in the actual *Ghûtah*, which both live upon and support their great mother city. Hidden as these little villages are by foliage, it requires a good guide to thread the mazes of paths leading to them. Near the city, especially when the roads are shut in with high walls made of great slabs of unbaked mud, only those on horseback can at all see what direction they are following. West of the plain and city is *Jebal Kaysun*, which rises 1,600 feet above it; it is the most eastern ridge of the Anti-Lebanon. These mountains stretch away toward the south, where Hermon, snow-clad for two-thirds of the year, raises his mighty head. Running all along the southern border are low volcanic hills which in their higher parts attain a height of 500 feet above the plain. They are known as the *Jebal el Aswad*, or black mountains. To the east and north the even horizon of the desert is only occasionally broken by low hills.

The great western mountain chain of the Anti-Lebanon is riven close to Damascus by a deep, winding valley known as the *Wady Barada*; down this come, in places so closely compressed together as to leave no room to spare, the river Barada, the source of the city's natural advantages, and the road and railway, the secret of her present, and guarantee of her future, prosperity.

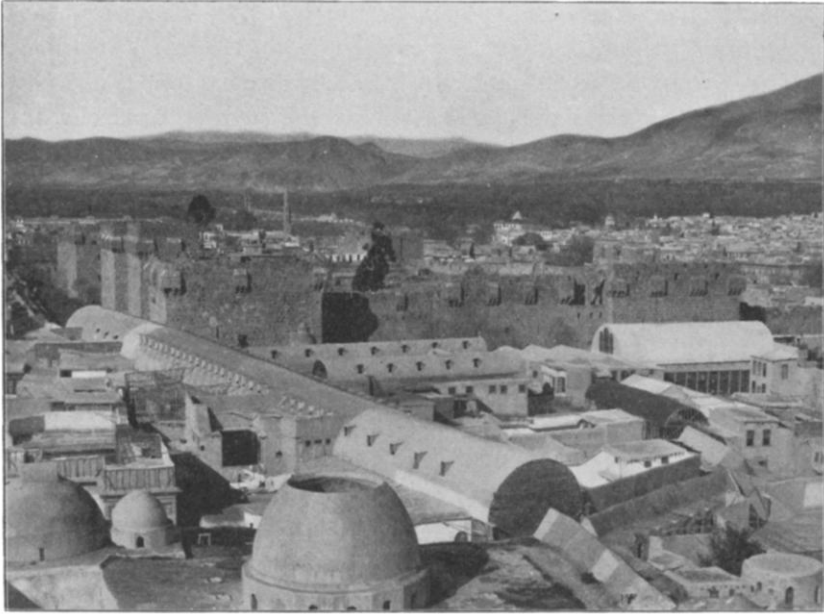
The road, seventy miles long, was constructed in 1860, and on it ran for many years the "diligences" by which her mails and her travelers came and went. Today it has been thrown open to all, and is fast falling into decay on account of the railway. This—the Beirut-Damascus-Hauran line—was opened in 1895. The section from Beirut to Damascus was constructed in face of great natural difficulties. The line first scales the Lebanon from Beirut, ascending nearly 5,000 feet in twenty-three miles; it then descends to the great plain of Cœle-Syria, crosses it in a northerly direction, and ascends eastward by a long, winding valley into the heart of the Anti-Lebanon, where, after running south along a long, open valley, it plunges down the steep, winding *Wady Barada*. The scenery on the route presents many varieties of beauty, and an approach to Damascus by rail is in every way more enjoyable than in the, now, old-fashioned coaches. The terminus of the Beirut line at the *Meidan* station is the beginning of the Hauran line, which, running sixty-two miles to the south of Damascus, taps that great corn-growing district of Palestine, and brings manifest signs of nineteenth-century civilization before the astonished eyes of a people who previously had hardly even seen a "Frangee."

The river Barada—the *Chrysorrhoas* of Greek times—arises in the plateau of Zebedani, in the heart of the Anti-Lebanon, springing out of the earth in a deep pool 300 yards by 50 yards. After running through a short stretch of level land, it enters the narrow valley called after it, and, rushing downward in a continuous series of cascades and waterfalls, descends over a thousand feet in twenty-three miles. High up on its course it passes the ruins of the Abila of Lysanias (Luke 3:3), and rather over half way down it is joined by the waters of another large spring—*Ain Fejeh*—which contributes much more water than the original source. As the Barada approaches Damascus, but before it leaves its narrow bounds, it divides, by means of an ancient system of dams and aqueducts, into seven streams; these all lie at different levels, and on debouching into the plain are led out fanwise in all directions over the plain; some are chiefly devoted to the watering of gardens, but the larger ones

pass into the city, where by innumerable channels their waters are led into every courtyard and house in the city. The surplus waters leave the city in a number of streams, which again divide and subdivide to work mills and irrigate the gardens, and finally empty themselves twenty miles from the city in a large morass, somewhat euphemistically called "the lakes." This wonderful system of irrigation doubtless existed from the earliest times, being probably constructed by the Aramæans on their first arrival; it certainly must be as old as the *city* of Damascus, for without it the city could not exist. The paramount importance here ascribed to this single river naturally suggests the question: Where are "Abana and Pharphar, rivers of Damascus," the waters of which were described by Naaman as "better than all the waters of Israel"? (2 Kings 5:12.)

It is pretty generally acknowledged that the present Barada is the Abana or Amanah (R. V.), and, if so, the Amana mountain (Cant. 4:8) probably was a high point near its upper source. The Pharphar may be a small stream descending a wady north of the wady Barada, and joining the canal from the Barada known as the Taura, but much more probably it is the present *Awaj*. The river *Awaj*, *i. e.*, crooked, takes its rise in several small streams in mount Hermon, and, running the whole way outside the plain, loses itself in a "lake" similar to that which receives the Barada. Although distant its whole course from Damascus—it is never nearer than about twenty miles from the city—it is, firstly, only second in size to the Barada itself; secondly, it sends an important canal to water a large portion of the southern part of the *Ghûtah*, and very probably may have once watered a considerable share; thirdly, its waters actually join with those of the Barada in watering the district; and, lastly, it is suggested that in the mountain peak near one of its chief streams known as *Jebal Barbar* we have a survival of the name Pharphar in an altered form. The contrast suggested to Naaman was that of the immense fertility produced by his two rivers and the comparative uselessness of the Jordan, and possibly his recent journey, in which he must have crossed all three in succession, may have brought before his mind the clear mountain

streams and their immense use—on them the whole district depended—with the deep, muddy Jordan, which accomplishes so little. If rivers were to cleanse him, surely his gods had given him finer ones than Israel's Jehovah had to his people.



DAMASCUS—THE ARCADES AND THE FORTRESS

We must now leave the streams and gardens to turn to the city. Damascus of today, though fair from far, is usually a disappointment on near acquaintance. The streets, with a few exceptions, are narrow, crooked, badly paved, and often dirty. The houses, as seen from the streets, as a rule consist of a few brown mud walls, low doors, and mean latticed windows. The roofs are flat and made of mud, and during the rain discharge what they collect over the passers-by by a series of pipes conveniently arranged, apparently, for that purpose. Scarcely any street is of the same width for twenty consecutive yards, and the feats of horsemanship performed by the carriage drivers in traversing the winding lanes would do credit to any cabman in

the world. The exteriors of the houses are, however, deceptive, for the interior is often as magnificent as the outside is mean. No other eastern city presents such extreme contrasts. On entering a house one usually descends a few steps, an arrangement necessitated on account of the water—the street has risen as the years ran on, but the courtyard must keep low enough to receive the running water. Passing along a short passage and round a sharp turning, one enters most unexpectedly a beautiful courtyard. The courts of all the better houses have a large open pool in the center, built up two or three feet from the ordinary level and covered outside with marble and supplied with running water; the whole floor is covered with colored marble or other stones, and grouped around are lemon, citron, orange, and other trees. The doors and windows of the rooms open upon the court, and in the case of richer men—especially Moslems—there is an inner and often more magnificent court, perhaps even two or three, beyond. On the southern, most shady, side there is a covered-in smaller court, practically a room with the whole side toward the courtyard unbuilt; this is the *lewan*, round the sides of which is a raised seat called the *derwan*, and in which during the greater part of the year visitors are received, and the hours of recreation are spent in smoking argelics and drinking coffee. Of the rooms the lower ones are specially inhabited in the summer, but in the winter they often become so damp from the moisture under the floors that those in the upper story are preferred. These upper rooms are generally very flimsy structures, being built of simply wood and mud bricks. The winters are usually short, and the rainfall is much less than in Palestine proper, so that the people do not suffer much inconvenience from the unsuitability of their houses to the cold.

The *suks* or bazaars of Damascus are famous all over the East, and within late years great improvements have been effected in this part of the city. The “Greek” bazaar has now many shops with plate-glass windows, but the great majority retain something of their primitive appearance and mode of doing business. As everywhere in the East, the trades of special kinds are grouped together, so that “the silver bazaar,” “the

cotton bazaar," "the shoemakers' bazaar," "the saddlers' bazaar," etc., are the exclusive places for obtaining those particular goods. Many of the most frequented *suks* are covered-in streets, so that the cold and wet of winter and the hottest rays of the summer sun are thus excluded. A considerable section of "Straight street" is thus roofed over, and in it and the numerous covered-in side streets a purchaser can pass dryshod in all directions till he complete his purchases.

The remains of ancient Damascus are largely under the foundations of the present city, and in many parts prostrate columns, broken statues, and Greek inscriptions have at various times been exposed in repairing roads. This is especially the case along the course of "Straight street." The city walls, in a greatly dismantled condition, may be traced almost uninterruptedly around their ancient limits. Along the north side, from the imposing citadel, now a mere shell, but once of great strength, until the northeast angle, the wall runs along the south bank of the river. Near the northeast angle is *Bab Toma*, or the gate of Thomas, the great gate of the Christian quarter. The section of the city lying between this and the west gate, *Bab Shurki*, contains the larger part of the Christian inhabitants; it was this part that was almost leveled to the ground in the massacre of 1860. *Bab Shurki*, the east gate, is by far the most interesting. It is a fine old Roman triple gateway, the central arch of which was 38 feet high and $20\frac{1}{2}$ feet wide. This and the southern small arch are now walled up, and only the northern small arch—half the size of the great one—is now used. Passing along the walls southward from this point, there is no further entrance to the city for nearly a mile. There was a gate about four hundred yards from the east gate, and its walled-up, half-ruined remains today receive the name of *Bab Keisan*, but it is many centuries since it was open. Possibly it was closed as a blow aimed at the prosperity of the Jews, whose quarter is here, and who have in consequence no way out of the city except through other quarters. They were once rich and powerful, but have in late years become much impoverished. By the Turks they are worse treated than all in the city, and by the Christians they are inconceivably

hated because of the universal belief in that foolish "blood accusation."¹ *Bab Keisan* is also the traditional site of where Paul was let down from a window in a basket (Acts 9 : 25). Let me say at once that neither this, nor the traditional houses of Judas



DAMASCUS—THE WALL OVER WHICH PAUL FLED

and Ananias, nor the two or three sites of the conversion of the great apostle, are worthy of any credence. It is enough that the city, and its approach, are the sites of these great scenes.

The walls were protected by a moat which still exists on all but the western side, and in many places, if not all, were double or treble. As they exist today, only the foundations date from before Moslem times, and much of the work is recent patchwork.

The central object in the city is the great mosque. This, through the carelessness of a workman who was repairing the roof, was completely gutted, in 1893, by a fire lasting three days.

¹ That is, the accusation that the Jews kill Christians, especially Christian boys, to mix their blood with their Passover bread. It has been repeatedly disproved, but is periodically revived amid scenes of great excitement against the eastern Jews of Damascus.

Before this it was a really magnificent building and one of the largest mosques in the world. It is now being restored in a very substantial way, but it is doubtful if it will ever be again what it was. It is in and around the walls of this building that almost all the antiquities of Damascus are now concentrated. The site was once occupied by a large heathen temple—probably by several. Under Theodosius or his son Arcadius the temple was converted into a Christian church. When the victorious Moslems (634 A. D.) took the city, the church was at the first divided between the Moslems and the Christians; but in 708 the Omeiyade Khalif Welid, after trying in vain to buy out the Christians, at length personally commenced the destruction of the building, and, when it was largely thrown down, rebuilt the whole as a great mosque. The first mosque was, from all descriptions, most magnificent, but it was destroyed by fire in 1069 and its successor in 1400. Three fires have thus swept over the area. A recent examination of the buildings conducted by the London "Palestine Exploration Fund" has led to the following main conclusions. It is thought probable that the whole of the present western wall of the mosque belongs to the Syrian heathen temple and was erected early in the second century before Christ. As this is the only, or almost the only, piece above ground belonging to that period, it is impossible without excavations to say how the buildings lay. It is probable that in early times there must have been here a magnificent inclosure (1,000 feet by 1,300 feet), many times larger than that of the present mosque; within this, no doubt, stood the "house of Rimmon" (2 Kings 5 : 18) referred to by Naaman. Of handsome buildings of a later period (probably second century A. D.) we have even now considerable remains. A portion of a great propylæa and a large part of two very fine triple gateways are still visible. It is over the large central gate of the best-preserved of these that the Christians carved the famous Greek inscription, "Thy kingdom, O Christ, is an everlasting kingdom and thy dominion endureth throughout all generations" (Ps. 145 : 13). It is strange, indeed, that this has survived all the fires, destructions, and conquests, and, neither obliterated nor

hidden, may be read today by all who will. In this, the southern, wall of the mosque, where lies this inscription, we can trace remains of building of all periods—Syrian or Græco-Syrian, Roman, Byzantine, Arabic, and Turkish.



DAMASCUS—THE COURT OF THE GREAT MOSQUE

The great mosque of the Omeiyades has a length of 446 feet and breadth of 113 feet, and, when repaired, will, as before the fire, consist of a central transept running north and south, roofed by a great stone dome, and two naves running east and west. These, 180 feet long each, are divided into three aisles by a double row of monolith columns crowned by Corinthian capitals. Of the four rows the fire of 1893 destroyed all but one, but most of the work has now been replaced. The inside of the mosque was for a considerable height everywhere lined with beautiful marbles, and the higher parts were largely covered with mosaics—although all this was destroyed. Two special treasures said to have been kept here, the head of John the Baptist and one of the four original authorized versions of the Koran,

have probably likewise gone. The former will be probably more easily replaced than the latter!

Adjoining the mosque on the north is a large open courtyard of the length of the mosque and somewhat broader. It is surrounded on three sides by cloisters constructed of old columns, now mostly incased in marble. To the whole inclosure there are four doors and three minarets. Two of the doors have handsome bronze gates showing a cup—the “crest” of the Omeiyade dynasty. Of the minarets one is dedicated to *Saïdna Issa, i. e.*, “Our Lord Jesus,” and the Moslems have a tradition that he will at the last day descend upon it to judge the world—condemning, of course, all but Moslems! From the western minaret, which travelers are permitted to ascend, a magnificent view is obtained of the city, gardens, and surrounding country.

The people of Damascus are an enterprising race, and are proud to belong to *Damask esh Sham*—or, as they usually say, simply *esh Sham*; the great majority are Moslems, who, it must be owned, in business relations are often the best class to have to deal with. The 26,000 Christians and 10,000 Jews also take a very fair share in the city business, the shops for the more characteristic European goods being chiefly in their hands. The streets are full of bustle, and business of various kinds often goes on far into the night. The special industries of Damascus are weaving—in cotton and silk—rope making, tanning, carpentering, brass work, the manufacturing of confectionery, and the making of clothes, boots, and shoes, etc. Great quantities of cotton, flax, madder, hemp, tobacco, and fruits, especially apricots, are grown in the fields around, and silk in a raw condition is largely imported from the Lebanon to be spun, dyed, and manufactured into the curtains, headdresses, belts, etc., which are specially characteristic of Damascus all over the East. Beaten brass work and a special kind of needle work, used for the long coats of the richer Moslems, are largely, together with weaving, the occupation of the poorer Jews. European goods, especially cotton and woollen goods, cloth, and hardware, are largely imported. The total annual imports may be reckoned at about £700,000, of which considerably more than half are from England.

The bazaars on busy days, especially on Fridays, present a wonderful spectacle. Men and women in every stage of civilization and in all imaginable costumes jostle one another in the streets: Turkish effendies' wives in bright silk *azzars*; dusty Bedouins in dirty blue cotton shirts as their only garment; Circassians in their semi-military costume and neat Astrakan caps; the village sheik in his best for marketing days, at that of all colors mixed; Kurds and negroes, Turks and Soudanese—all varieties of skin and costume in the world—all in one moving mass, intent on making the best possible bargain. It has been remarked that the only costume which would excite the wonder and suspend the business of all would be a modern silk hat. Camels loaded high with sacks of *tibn*, mules carrying twice their own bulk of hemp sticks, groups of donkeys laden with earth and refuse and proceeding at a steady jog-trot regardless of all, a quick-moving carriage, a horseman here and there—all help to keep the crowd on the move and prevent stagnation. *Daherak*, *daherak* (your back, your back), and *wajhak*, *wajhak* (your face, your face), resound on all sides; there is no standing still; yet with it all, as a rule, the utmost good humor prevails. But after sunset, on the still warm evenings, when the shops are shut and the *suks* become deserted, all stream out to the cafés and the gardens, and there, beside the running streams and amid many-colored lanterns, the Damascene passes, with his coffee and argelic, or his iced sherbet, his hours of recreation in quiet content. The running water, the snow brought daily from the mountains and sold everywhere, the splendid Turkish baths, combine to make Damascus seem a very paradise to the weary and thirsty traveler arriving in the hot seasons.

The history of Damascus, even in brief, would occupy more space than the length of this whole article—it is, indeed, the history of the East, and for half the period the history of the world. There are few cities, indeed, with a history so important and so varied. “Twice it has been the capitals of great empires, and at one time its dominion reached from the shores of the Atlantic to the Indies.” The chief biblical events connected with Damascus cluster around two great characters—two names

which are remembered today more than those of all the great men in the past who once ruled her: these are, Elisha the prophet and Paul the apostle. It was to Elisha that the little Israelite captive maid referred the great General Naaman (2 Kings, chap. 5); it was Elisha who perplexed the great Benhadad (2 Kings 6:8-12), and prophesied the great slaughter of his army (2 Kings, chap. 7). It was Elisha who in Damascus discovered to Hazael the wicked and ambitious secrets of the king's servant's heart (2 Kings 8:9). To Christians, and therefore, we may say, to all the world, the most important event that happened near and in Damascus was the conversion of Saul the persecutor. This momentous event must make Damascus famous in all lands and all climes, for, unlike the great battles and sieges that have occurred here and around in all the centuries, this was an event concerned in establishing, not a passing world kingdom, but His whose "kingdom is an everlasting kingdom," and His "dominion endureth throughout all generations." In the strength of that belief four missionary societies—the Irish Presbyterian church, the Church of England Jews Society, the Edinburgh Medical Missionary Society, and the British Syrian Schools—have for some years been patiently and unitedly laboring here for Christ's sake.

Such, then, is Damascus. "The most remarkable fact connected with the history of this city is that it has not only existed, but flourished, under every change of dynasty and under every form of government; it may well be called the 'perennial city.' Its station among the capitals of the world has been wonderfully uniform. The presence of royalty does not appear to have greatly advanced its internal welfare, nor does their removal seem to have induced decay or even decline. It has never rivaled, in the vastness of its extent nor in the gorgeousness of its structures, a Nineveh, a Babylon, or a Rome; but neither has it resembled them in the greatness of its fall nor in the desolation of its ruins. It has existed and prospered under Persian despotism, Grecian anarchy, and Roman patronage; and it exists and prospers still, despite Turkish oppression and misrule. It is like an oasis amid the desolation of ancient Syria, for it has

survived many generations of cities that have in succession risen up around it; and while they lie in ruins, it possesses all the freshness and vigor of youth."

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